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ABSTRACT

This digest identifies some of the ethical issues which appeared in the mass media in the 1980s and discusses the implications which these issues have for the law and for those who already work in or study the mass media, as well as for those college students contemplating a career in journalism or broadcasting. (NKA)

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CLEARINGHOUSE ON READING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS
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DIGEST

# Media Ethics: Some Specific Problems

by Stephen S. Gottlieb

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The decade of the 1970s gave rise to a reinvigorated press. Such scandals as Watergate and the Pentagon Papers case renewed the spirit of "investigative journalism," and created in many young people a desire to pursue careers as reporters.

In the 1980s, incidents occurred and new technologies appeared which together raised questions about the ethical values of American journalists. This digest seeks to identify some of those ethical issues and to point to the work of those who have studied these issues.

## *Imaginary addicts and a televised suicide*

*Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke received the 1981 Pulitzer Prize for her feature story, "Jimmy's World," the account of an eight-year old, tenement-bound heroin addict. Publication of the story set off widespread demands for the government to do more about the scourge of drugs in society. A few days after Cooke accepted the Pulitzer, it became evident that she had made up the story.

In detailing the events of the Janet Cooke incident, David L. Eason focuses on the pressures which may have led Cooke to concoct her report (Eason, 1986). Eason theorizes that Cooke, a young, black, female reporter, may have felt compelled to give the liberal, white, male editors of the *Post* exactly what they seemed to demand: stories portraying the horrors of ghetto life. In Eason's view, the editors would not have sent out one of their own (i.e., a male white reporter) into the urban slums to obtain details of life there. As such, the paper made itself overly dependent on material supplied by inexperienced reporters like Cooke.

Eason sees the end of the Cooke story as taking on mythical trappings. Established journalism, in the role of the defender of the faith, ultimately cast out the violator of its moral code. Cooke's ostracism from the profession was seen, at least by many within the established press, as a necessary step in the protection of the standards of truthfulness and accuracy in journalism.

One incident in which journalism could not so easily assume a mantle of purity was the suicide of Pennsylvania state treasurer R. Budd Dwyer. On January 22, 1987 Dwyer, who had been convicted of racketeering and mail fraud, called a news conference. As the TV cameras rolled and the reporters awaited the official's anticipated resignation announcement, Dwyer pulled out a revolver and ended his life. Some of Pennsylvania's television and radio stations broadcast only partial recordings of the event; one TV station ran the entire tape of the suicide. As Matviko (1988) points out, those media outlets that declined to carry the entire suicide took a somewhat holier-than-thou stance regarding the incident. The station that showed its viewers the shooting was defensive about its editorial decision. Interestingly, a survey of more than 800 viewers showed that members of the public were fairly evenly divided between those who supported the decision to carry the shooting in its entirety (46%) and those who opposed the choice (54%).

## *Media ethics and the new technologies*

With the 1980s came new developments in the manner in which information was presented to the public. Photographic methods improved, enabling newspapers and magazines to show to their readers images that reflected an "improved" vision of reality. But as is true of many new techniques and inventions, the advancements in photography raised ethical questions.

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Some of these issues were addressed by Shiela Reaves in her article, "Digital Alteration of Photographs in Magazines: An Examination of the Ethics" (1989).

As Reaves explains, new computer processes permit editors to alter the content of photographic images. Colors can be controlled, and objects or people can be removed from or added to pictures. Furthermore, if the changes are made carefully, they are virtually undetectable. To confuse the issue, negatives can be manufactured from an altered image to create "proof" that the photograph represents reality. The ethical issue is obvious: how far can photo editors take the alteration process while still purporting to present to readers a genuine image?

Reaves asked twelve magazine editors about their publications' practices with respect to computer enhancement of photographs. The editors unanimously claimed that they would refuse to apply the technique to news photographs. One respondent labeled such retouching "never...morally justifiable."

While the editors decried tampering with news photographs, most of them saw no ethical difficulty in adjusting the backgrounds of cover photographs to fit headlines and so on. Some also saw nothing wrong with deleting stray objects from pictures.

Reaves found that non-news magazines freely adjust elements of photographs for the best possible presentation. For instance, a home decorating publication might delete an unattractive curtain from the window of an otherwise "picture-perfect" home. A food magazine might erase a cigarette butt from a plateful of the consummate holiday feast.

## *Media ethics and codes of conduct*

What happens when a reporter derives personal gain or allows others to achieve such gain from his inside information about his organization's publication plans? Stories in the prestigious *Wall Street Journal* have frequently helped determine the success or failure of a business venture. During the 1980s, a *Journal* reporter was found to have contributed to insider trading by passing tips along as to when his paper would carry stories about firms. This event was mentioned in an especially thought-provoking article by Robert E. Drechsel entitled "The Legal Risks of Social Responsibility" (1987). Drechsel suggests that in such cases as the *Journal* incident, the existence of an internal policy or code of ethics could backfire on a news organization. In Drechsel's view, a party alleging that a news organization has committed libel (or in the insider trading case, a government prosecutor alleging that a reporter has practiced insider trading) can point to the code of ethics as a standard of care for the organization. For example, if a newspaper's policy required double confirmation of facts, a person alleging that a story was printed in disregard of its truth or falsity could point to the lack of a second confirmation as "proof" of such disregard.

Drechsel identifies other risks inherent in ethical codes. If there were an industry-wide code to which most medium- and large-market radio news operations adhered, a small-market station might find it difficult or impossible to meet the standards set by the code. A city hall reporter in Boston might have no trouble in offering a public official the opportunity to deny an allegation of misconduct before the accusation is broadcast, if a code so required. However, a reporter in Smalltown, USA, who doubles as station engineer and afternoon announcer, facing time and resource constraints, could find it difficult or impossible to meet such a standard.

In "The Case against Mass Media Codes of Ethics," Jay Black and Ralph Barney offer two major arguments against ethical codes for news reporting (1985). First, such standards are inconsistent with the notion of an unregulated press as envisioned by the First Amendment. As the authors suggest, protection of a free press is but a facet of protection of everyone's free expression. Each person best develops as an individual and a citizen if he or she is free to obtain whatever information may contribute to that growth. Governmental control of the media, or even self-imposed regulations to which all reporters must comply, limits the flow of such information.

Black and Barney's second argument against ethical codes for the news profession emerges from the difference between what they label "moral philosophy" and mere "moralizing." The authors suggest that a genuine moral philosophy evolves within the reporter as that person gains experience. On the other hand, codes merely advise as to the industry's view of what is appro-

priate behavior. The codes remove the need for reporters to become what Black and Barney refer to as "professional philosophers" who are capable of making their own decisions about what is right and wrong.

If codes of ethics are ineffective means of securing good journalistic practices, what would work better? John C. Merrill offers one answer in the title of his essay, "Good Reporting Can Be a Solution to Ethics Problem" (1987). Merrill would set the standard of ethical journalism at simply expecting the reporter to write a good story. As he sees it, expecting the journalist to expound upon the ramifications of an event is empty moralizing. Merrill would also call upon reporters to abandon the claim of objectivity (an obviously unobtainable goal) for an admitted subjectivity which the reporters constantly work to overcome.

Journalists themselves accept Merrill's view that objectivity equals ethicality, but they see objectivity as a reasonable goal. When Merrill asked 50 reporters and 50 journalism educators whether an accurate story is an ethical story (Merrill, 1985), 64% of the reporters agreed. Conversely, only about half as many of the educators took the same position. Almost all of the journalists had faith in the possibility of objective journalism, while almost all of the educators negated that possibility.

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